

Message Text

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ACTION HA-05

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C O N F I D E N T I A L CANBERRA 5726

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SREF, VN, AS
SUBJECT: AUSTRALIAN POLICY ON INDOCHINESE REFUGEES

REFS: 1.) BENNETT/SQUIRE TELCON 7/19 2.) CANBERRA 5185
3.) KUALA LUMPUR 6552

1. SUMMARY: AUSTRALIAN POLICY TOWARD INDOCHINESE REFUGEES IS PRESENTLY FROZEN; THEY HAVE ANNOUNCED THEIR WILLINGNESS TO TAKE 9000 THIS YEAR, THEY ARE NOT CURRENTLY COUNTING DIRECT BOAT ARRIVALS AGAINST THIS NUMBER, THEY HAVE TOLD US THAT THEIR PROGRAM WILL BE AN ON-GOING ONE (I.E., IT IS NOT LIMITED SOLELY TO THE 9000 IN THE CURRENT PROGRAM), AND THEY ARE COMMITTING THEMSELVES NO FURTHER FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL MONTHS (OCTOBER/NOVEMBER IS THE DATE THEY USE FOR A POLICY REVIEW) UNTIL IT CAN BE SEEN WHETHER THE REFUGEES EXODUS FROM INDOCHINA CONTINUES AT THE SAME LEVELS, INCREASES, OR DIMINISHES. IN THE ABSENCE OF A DEMONSTRABLE DECREASE IN THE NUMBER OF REFUGEES, IT IS OUR BELIEF THAT OPINION IN AUSTRALIA GENERALLY, AND WITHIN THE GOA IN PARTICULAR, WILL HARDEN AGAINST FURTHER SUBSTANTIAL INTAKES. END SUMMARY.

2. GOA IMMIGRATION MINISTER MICHAEL MACKELLAR IS IN
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THAILAND LOOKING OVER REFUGEE CAMPS AND TALKING TO THAI OFFICIALS. HE HAS BEEN GONE FOR NEARLY THREE WEEKS, AND IS VISITING THE PHILIPPINES, THAILAND, MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE AND INDONESIA. IN HIS ABSENCE, AND BECAUSE OF THE GENERAL STATE OF AUSTRALIAN NERVES OVER THE REFUGEE ISSUE, NO ONE IN DFA OR DEPT OF IMMIGRATION IS WILLING TO EVEN DISCUSS CHANGES IN WHAT

THE GOA IS ALREADY COMMITTED TO UNTIL HE RETURNS.
UNTIL HE REPORTS TO THE PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET,
WE DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING SHORT OF AN URGENT PRESIDENTIAL
APPEAL DIRECTLY TO THE PRIME MINISTER WOULD BE LIKELY TO
PRODUCE ANY MOVEMENT ON AUSTRALIAN REFUGEE POLICY.

3. THE IDEA OF "JOINT ASSURANCES" TO INDONESIA AND
POSSIBLY OTHERS (THE PHILIPPINES, SINGAPORE, MALAYSIA
OR THAILAND) IS ALSO PRESENTLY ON ICE PENDING MACKELLAR'S
RETURN. IMMIGRATION DEPT TELLS US MACKELLAR BROACHED
THE SUBJECT WITH THE INDONESIANS AND GOT A MIDDLINGLY
ENCOURAGING RESPONSE: GOI REPORTEDLY SAID "SURE, LET'S
ENTER INTO A GENTLEMEN'S AGREEMENT: WE'LL HOLD THE BOATS
PROVIDED YOU GIVE US ASSURANCES THAT EITHER YOU OR
SOMEONE ELSE WILL TAKE THE REFUGEES OFF OUR HANDS."
WHEN MACKELLAR RETURNS WE EXPECT TO BE ABLE TO GET FROM
HIM MORE SPECIFIC VIEWS ABOUT WHAT SORTS OF GUARANTEES
THE INDONESIANS WOULD WANT. MACKELLAR WAS, HOWEVER,
DISCOURAGED FROM RAISING THE QUESTION OF EITHER TRANSIT
OR RESETTLEMENT CAMPS WITH THE FILIPINOS -- WHETHER HE
DID SO OR NOT WILL NOT BE KNOWN HERE UNTIL HIS RETURN
NEXT WEEK.

4. THE GOA VERY MUCH CONTINUES TO SUPPORT THE IDEA OF
AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON REFUGEES COMING OUT OF
THE BANGKOK UNHCR MEETING IN SEPTEMBER; MACKELLAR HAS
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BEEN DRUMMING UP SUPPORT FOR IT ON HIS CURRENT TRIP,
AND WE UNDERSTAND THE IDEA HAS MET WITH FAIR SUPPORT
FROM OFFICIALS IN THE COUNTRIES HE HAS VISITED. (THAT
MIGHT HAVE BEEN NOT MUCH MORE THAN "WE WOULD NOT OBJECT..."
WHICH THE GOA HAS INTERPRETED AS "SUPPORT").

5. ATTORNEY GENERAL BELL HAS NOT DISCUSSED REFUGEES
WITH GOA OFFICIALS SINCE HE HAS BEEN HERE. THE ONLY
TIME REFUGEES CAME UP WAS AT A LUNCHEON IN HIS HONOR, AND
HE GAVE A RATHER GENERAL RESPONSE TO THE EFFECT THAT
"THAT'S NOT MY LINE -- THE STATE DEPARTMENT HANDLES THAT
SORT OF THING AND I JUST DO WHATEVER THEY RECOMMEND."
ALSTON

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